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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001333

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/30/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [VT](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: ACTING FM ON VATICAN RELATIONS AND THE
RETURN OF THE "RESIGNED" FM

REF: BEIRUT 1123

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) On August 30, Culture and Acting Foreign Minister Tariq Mitri told the Ambassador that Vatican officials were pleased to have recently spoken with the Secretary about the upcoming elections in Lebanon. The Vatican finds itself in agreement with the U.S. on the need for Lebanon to elect a president on time, to have the Patriarch take a more active role and to discourage any amendments to the Lebanese constitution. Mitri said that some Vatican officials, including Papal Nuncio to the U.S. Archbishop Pietro Sambi, also feel there is a difference between the Vatican and U.S. positions. The Vatican wants to protect Lebanon and to ensure that it does not become a battleground for larger problems in the region and it does not want to be "used" as a tool for U.S. interests. Mitri suggested that another high-level U.S. diplomatic visit to Rome would help to convince Vatican officials that the U.S. shares its goals for the future of Lebanon. Mitri noted that Vatican officials, including the Pope, will meet Patriarch Sfeir in Rome on September 6.

¶2. (C) On internal Ministry of Foreign Affairs issues, Mitri called the current working environment "almost intolerable" since the return of FM Salloukh, who tendered his resignation last November along with all other Shia members of the GOL cabinet. There is no secrecy or confidentiality in diplomatic traffic. The Charge in Washington has stopped sending diplomatic cables and now communicates with Mitri directly via e-mail. FM Salloukh will likely attend UNGA, using the "Resigning Foreign Minister" title while there. Finally, Salloukh's staff asked Mitri to hand over all requests for agreement. Mitri complied and included the letter for Ambassador Feltman's successor. "Let's wait to see what they do with it," said Mitri. End Summary.

Pleased with the Secretary's Call, but Still See a Difference with the U.S.

¶3. (C) Mitri told the Ambassador that he had just been to

Rome on August 24, where he met with Vatican Foreign Minister Mamberti. Mitri had both an office call, which he described as rather stiff, and a relaxed luncheon with Mamberti. Mamberti spent a great deal of time discussing the recent phone conversation between the Secretary and Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone. Mamberti

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praised the tone of the call and said Bertone was pleased that the Secretary was in "listening mode" which allowed Bertone the opportunity to share his thoughts on Lebanon and other issues. Mitri said that the Vatican was "flattered" by the Secretary's interest. Mamberti said that the Vatican is on the same page with the U.S. on Lebanon electing a president on time, the Patriarch take a more active role, discouraging any amendments to the constitution and a willingness to accept election of the president by a simple majority. However, Mamberti said that differences remain. The Vatican feels a need to "protect" Lebanon and it is not sure the U.S. feels the same sense of obligation. (Note: Mitri and the Ambassador agreed that this was not true. End Note.)

14. (C) Mitri told us that this sentiment had been echoed in Washington during a recent meeting between Lebanese Charge d'Affairs Antoine Chedid and Papal Nuncio to the U.S. Archbishop Pietro Sambi. Sambi had also been fully briefed on the Secretary's conversation with Bertone, but expressed a hesitancy in allying too closely with the U.S. on Lebanese issues. Sambi told Chedid that he does not want the Vatican to be "used" by the U.S. in its larger chess game with Syria and Iran. Mitri believes that there is no single action which prompted Sambi's reaction, but feels this is a long-standing opinion of the Nuncio.

15. (C) Mitri was delighted with the success of the Secretary's phone call in helping to engage the Vatican on

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Lebanon issues, but suggested that a high-level U.S. visit to

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Rome in mid-September would be even more effective. The Vatican needs to believe, 100 percent, that the U.S. shares its commitment to Lebanon's safety and security, he said.

Want the Patriarch to Play a Larger Role

16. (C) Mitri said the Vatican views the Patriarch's recent ambiguous statements as a sign of his uncertainty. The Vatican is still opposed to the idea of sending a Papal envoy to Beirut (for fear of treading on Maronite turf) and Mamberti said that the Patriarch must be empowered to play a larger role in a way that does not also step on his toes. The Patriarch, Mitri noted, arrives in Rome on 9/5 for Vatican meetings on 9/6. Unlike the Patriarch's previous visit to Rome, he now has formal appointment requests to see the Pope, Cardinal Bertone, and Foreign Minister Mamberti. These meetings should bolster the Patriarch and will hopefully clarify his thinking.

17. (C) A number of presidential candidates, including Nassib Lahoud and Charles Rizk, have been through Rome recently and Mitri believes that more will follow. At this time, Lahoud seems to be the Vatican's favored candidate. As for Boutros Harb, he struck Vatican officials as being "too much like a local politician." According to Mitri, Rome may not want to pick the final candidate, but they seem happy to "screen" them and may be inviting the candidates to visit. Mitri thinks that a specific list of acceptable candidates will be refined during the Patriarch's visit. He said that the Vatican is looking for a strong, credible candidate who is "respected beyond the borders of Lebanon" but it is unlikely they will come out publicly in favor of March 14 over March 18. The Ambassador said he hoped the Patriarch would "aim

high" and chose a strong, qualified candidate rather than settle on an unimpressive, but non-controversial figure.

¶8. (C) On August 29, March 14 stalwart Sheikh Michel Khoury told the Ambassador that the annual Maronite bishops' conference would be postponed until after the Patriarch's return. Mitri heard that it would not be postponed but would precede the Patriarch's travel (meaning that the Vatican views would not be reflected in the much-watched bishops' statement). Mitri is also not sure about Speaker Berri's publicly announced plans to visit the Patriarch after his return from Rome. Mitri said Berri is running out of "new solutions" for Lebanon's ills and he can't imagine what a new outreach to the Patriarch will do for Berri.

Dialogue with the Italian Government

¶9. (C) Mitri also took the opportunity to mention that Prime Minister Prodi had called Prime Minister Siniora to report on a recent call with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. According to Prodi, Assad indicated a willingness to cooperate with Italy on Lebanese issues. Mitri believes that Prodi retained a healthy amount of skepticism, but relayed Assad's message to Siniora as a hopeful sign. Mitri and Siniora will meet with PM Prodi and FM D'Alema during Siniora's September 4 trip to Rome. The Ambassador urged Mitri to secure a public statement of support from the GOI for the Lebanese elections before the Syrian FM arrives in Rome on September 6. The GOI has yet to issue a public statement and the timing would be ideal.

Resigned and then Returned - Lebanon's Foreign Minister

¶10. (C) Mitri (who is Culture Minister but also Acting Foreign Minister since the 11/11/06 Shia cabinet resignations) said that the atmosphere in the Foreign Ministry had become "almost intolerable" since the return of FM Salloukh, who is trying to exert his authority over the appointment of diplomats while refusing to fulfill other state duties. Salloukh left the cabinet last November along with all other Shia ministers. Unfortunately, legal experts say that nothing can be done to change this current situation, as Salloukh's resignation was never officially accepted. Mitri believes that Salloukh's recent actions have been taken without even the approval of President Emile Lahoud and Hizballah. Salloukh's motives may include a desire to protect Shia rights within the government,

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influence the Special Tribunal proceedings and hiring, and pave the way for a second, parallel government.

¶11. (C) Mitri is frustrated and uncomfortable with the situation. He said all confidentiality and secrecy in the Ministry has disappeared and he corresponds with colleagues, such as Charge Chedid in Washington, via direct e-mail. He says that whenever Salloukh takes the initiative on an issue, Mitri is then called in for clean-up. Salloukh's staff recently scolded Mitri for holding onto pending letters of agreement (that Lahoud had earlier refused to address), so Mitri handed them over. They included the letter requesting agreement for a new U.S. Ambassador to replace Ambassador Feltman. "Let's wait and see what they do with it," he said with a smile.

Attendance at UNGA

¶12. (C) Turning to UNGA attendance, Mitri said President Lahoud is allegedly traveling with a delegation of 40 people, to include Salloukh who will be using his "Resigning Foreign Minister" title during the proceedings. Salloukh will stay on as head of delegation for a few days after Lahoud's departure. Mitri said that typically, 3-4 professional

ambassadors accompany the party. He has asked the MFA's Political Department (headed by William Habib, a Mitri appointee rejected by Salloukh) to prepare a list of suggested names, but he doesn't know what will come of it.

¶13. (C) Mitri said that he will be going to New York on October 1 in his capacity as Minister of Culture to speak at a UN conference. He will also stay on for a few days of consultations.

Comment

¶14. (C) Mitri's read-out of Vatican thinking was encouraging. Moreover, Patriarch Sfeir's visit next week to Rome is an opportunity we hope Vatican officials will seize. The Patriarch, afraid of being burned or ignored, seems to have his sights set quite low in terms of the presidency. Hoping to avoid at all costs a vacancy in the Christian office, the Patriarch is ready to settle on a weak compromise figure and susceptible to seeing pro-Syrian March 8 and pro-independence March 14 figures as equivalent. We hope that the Vatican can inspire Sfeir to fight for a strong candidate with (as the Mamberti told Mitri) a reputation that extends beyond Lebanon. We also hope that the Vatican can build on the Patriarch's own statements by making clear public statements that it is an obligation on all of Lebanon's Christian MPs to show up to vote for elections to fill the only Christian presidency in the Middle East. We recommend that senior USG official(s) call Vatican counterparts in the run-up to the Patriarch's visit both to listen to Vatican thinking about messages to the Patriarch and to encourage strong engagement. In terms of the current conditions in the Foreign Ministry, this state of play gives us a small glimpse into what a second cabinet scenario would look like. The presence of Salloukh is exacerbating an already difficult situation. End Comment.
FELTMAN